

Algerian legislative elections:

False specificity, a dangerous status quo and reform in waiting

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The result of the parliamentary elections of May has apparently preserved the political status quo in Algeria. While Islamist parties have come to power in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt, is there an Algerian specificity? Is the Islamist answer that emerged in 1991 definitely outdated?

The legislative elections held in Algeria on 10 May 2012 awarded the ‘victory’ to the former sole legal party, the National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale, FLN),¹ that had ‘formally’ dominated the political scene in Algeria since independence in 1962. The National Rally for Democracy (Rassemblement National Démocratique, RND) led by Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia came well behind, in second place. The combined results of the two parties gave the ruling elite a comfortable majority in Parliament and apparently preserved the political status quo in Algeria.

“In 1991, it was a sanctioning vote. In 2012, it is a vote of refuge” declared the Minister of the Interior, Daho Ould Kablia. This premature conclusion speaks volumes about the impact, still very much alive among those in power, of the legislative elections of December 1991, won in the first round by the Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamique du Salut, FIS). The elections were annulled by the army and led to Algeria’s brutal civil war in the 1990s that left between 150,000 and 200,000 dead. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika presented the legislative elections of 10 May 2012 as being ‘as important as’ the triggering of the Algerian war of independence on 1 November 1954, that took place in a context of political change in the Arab world and of legislative elections that led to the political

¹ <http://maghrebemergent.info/economie/78-idees/12045-les-legislatives-restaurent-lhegemonie-du-vieux-fln-en-algerie.html>.

emergence of the ‘ikhwani’ Islamists (Muslim Brotherhood) in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco.

For the Algerian regime, which launched an intense campaign to encourage electoral turnout – often going as far as dubious behaviour such as the instrumentalisation of mosques and Friday prayers – the success of this rendez-vous was to be proof of the ‘specificity’ of Algeria. In the official Algerian discourse the populations bursting onto the public scene in the Arab world has caused a political ‘reappropriation’ of Algeria’s youth riots in October 1988 and of the democratic reforms initiated by Mouloud Hamrouche’s reformist government – subsequently suppressed by the ruling elite during the 1990s, against the backdrop of the civil war. For government supporters, the riots of October 1988 were nothing more than a ‘plot’, and the political and economic reforms initiated by Mouloud Hamrouche were an ill-advised response that allowed FIS Islamists to arrive at the doors of power. But with the ‘Arab Spring’ and the ‘expectations’ of reform expressed very diplomatically by the West, the 1988 riots and the reforms that followed have been endorsed a posteriori by the official discourse. In communication with the outside world they were presented as proof that Algeria had already had its own ‘political revolution’ before the rest of the Arab world. As early as February 2011, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mourad Medelci, who was the first to use this argument vis-à-vis the outside world declared that “the example of Algeria is a clear indication that each of our countries has [had] its own encounter with History... I should remind you that in 1988 there was a movement that much resembled the movement that we have seen in Tunisia and Egypt. There are countries that are very protective of their authenticity... This is a good indication of the specificity of

Algeria... Each has its own perception. Algeria has actually experienced its revolution before the others, in 1988”.²

Do the legislative elections of 10 May 2012 confirm this reassuring analysis made by government? Were these elections as free and honest as is often claimed by the testimony of international observers, particularly European observers? Do the official results give us a correct and reliable idea of the political map of the country? Is Algeria really an exception, and has the Islamist reaction triggered by the ‘fatal’ aborted vote of December 1991 been definitively relegated to Algeria’s past? What conclusions can we draw – for the near future – from the apparent political status quo that emerges from the results?

Open elections or plugging the gaps?

The campaign mounted by the government in favour of electoral turnout was massive. It mobilised considerable means, including imams of mosques whom the Minister for Religious Affairs, Boualem Ghlamlah, officially called on to push the faithful to turn out to vote. Those in opposition who favoured the boycott were totally banished from the public media.

The Minister of Religious Affairs went further and described those calling for a boycott of the elections as ‘cowards’, and those who intended not to vote as ‘hypocrites’. These excesses, reported by some newspapers, were in themselves an indicator that the main electoral aim of government was to obtain a ‘presentable’ participation rate, and to outstrip the 37% of official participation in the 2007 legislative

² http://www.algeria-watch.org/fr/article/pol/administration/medelci_europe_1.htm

elections. This would then indicate the consent of Algerians to the ‘wise’ politics of the regime, and their refusal to get involved in the ‘disorders’ of an Arab Spring often presented in pro-government media as the fruit of manipulation by Western [secret] services.³

In view of official participation rate proclaimed by the Constitutional Court, the government obtained its objective: 43.14% of electors reportedly turned out to vote. Even if the figure of a 56.86% abstention is very significant, the government was satisfied with the fact that the turnout rate in the 2007 legislative elections (37%) had been outdone. Turnout was otherwise comparable with that reported in Morocco for the legislative elections of November 2011 (45%), even if it is far from that registered in Tunisia for the election of the Constituent Assembly in October 2011 (54.1%). The Rally for Culture and Democracy (Rassemblement pour la Culture et la Démocratie, RCD) – which boycotted these elections – contested the official figures, estimating that the real turnout rate was not over 18%. However, it is really difficult to establish with certainty whether the official turnout rate was exaggerated or not. In fact, in spite of some improvements in the electoral system, monitors continue to lack reliable instruments of control. For some observers in Algiers, there was a ‘certain dosing’ to nudge the figure past the 37% threshold, but they admit that the government had the sense to avoid showing off approximate figures. In admitting that a majority of Algerians do not consent to the political game in the shape of the system

currently in place, the government gives an appearance of credibility to ‘its’ turnout rate.

A more detailed reading of the official figures allows us to refine the political analysis and to read the Algerians’ level of consent to the system more contextually. In fact, out of 21,645,841 registered voters, the number of votes cast was 9,339,026, with 7,634,979 being valid. The number of invalid ballots reached the significant figure of 1,704,047, i.e. practically 22% of votes cast. With 56.86% abstention and 18.24% annulled ballot sheets, these elections reveal that over two-thirds of the electorate did not consent to the system, or expressed strong reservations. The two parties in power, the FLN (208 seats) and the RND (68 seats), together won the absolute majority with only “1,848,420 votes, or nearly 9% of the number of registered electors and less than 25% of the votes cast” as noted by Hocine Belaloufi in the on-line newspaper *La Nation*.⁴ Therefore the ‘victory’ of regime’s parties did not weaken the menacing report of a strong disaffection of Algerians with their official institutions. Most observers also noted the advanced age of voters and the low level of interest among young people. This led to the anxiety, expressed in *Le Quotidien d’Oran*, that the combined results of the FLN and the RND could lead the regime “to the absurd conclusion that Algerians do not want change and are satisfied with the present situation. This would be totally mistaken when, according to the official figures, abstentions constituted the huge majority of electors”.⁵ Thanks to a strong rate of abstention and to an electoral system that eliminates candidates who obtain less than 5% of the vote, an

³ For example, the development of the situation in Libya, with the intervention of NATO forces, was strongly and effectively instrumentalised with elderly Algerians.

⁴ http://lanation.info/Lecons-d-un-scrutin_a1009.html.
⁵ http://www.lequotidien-oran.com/?news=5168197&archive_date=2012-05-14

electoral nucleus loyal to government but representing a minority when compared to the body of electors can provide a comfortable majority for the regime's parties, but without resolving the crisis of representation in Algerian society.

The 'Algerian specificity' invoked by government supporters thus appeared in all its relativity: unconcerned with anything apart from the genuine rejection within Algerian society of any return to the violence of the 1990s. Abstention and blank votes must therefore be interpreted as an expression of peaceful contestation against government. Some analysts risked a little political psychology, stressing that the high level of abstention was a message to the regime: the latter had put society out of action, it holds all the keys and is therefore responsible for dealing with the issue.

Technically honest, politically biased

It is clear, however, that the elections of 10 May were 'technically' correct on the superficial level where the international observers made their declarations, but were at the same time politically biased. All as for the previous elections, the 'opening up' of the media only occurred during the electoral period. For two decades, Algerian political life has been reduced to the discourse of approval of government for the parties enlisted in the Presidential Alliance and a forced marginalisation of those in opposition. The artificial character of Algerian politics controlled upstream by government – particularly the security services – has led to a real disaffection on the part of citizens. For more than a decade and in defiance of the law, the regime prevented the appearance of new political parties, but on the eve of elections it licensed a score of parties, thus

reinforcing the idea that these line-ups were only created to 'enjoy the spoils'. Preconditions for normal political life and freedom were not fulfilled on time, because of the monopoly on broadcasting media, the regime's ability to stifle the newspapers by exploiting advertising revenue and the barriers to political and trade union activity. The consequence is that the election results do not allow us to identify the real weight of the different political currents in Algeria. By ideological bias, the leading newspapers in Algeria, while decrying the elections and denouncing 'electoral fraud', loudly applauded the fact that these elections can be read as a reaction against the Islamists. But was this really the case?

The weight of the Islamists

The reading of definitive breakdown in the electoral results left no doubt: the Algerian Islamists, who hoped to profit from the 'green wave' taking place throughout North Africa, had been defeated. The Green Algeria Alliance (Alliance de l'Algérie verte, AAV) – an alliance of three Islamist parties of which the Muslim Brothers' Movement of Society for Peace (Mouvement de la Société de Paix, MSP) was the pivot – won only 49 seats out of 462. Together, the five Islamist parties obtained 61 seats. The MSP, which had taken part in the Presidential Alliance during the last decade, expected a higher score and even hoped to carry off the victory. Discouraged by its rather modest results – which put it in third place – the MSP denounced, through the Green Algeria Alliance (AAV), results that "contradict the political reality of the ballot box", and are a "confiscation of the will of the Algerian people hoping for reform". The AAV called on its militants to "pursue the march of 'green Algeria' to start off with the

first fruits of Algeria's deferred democratic Spring".

The MSP, decided – albeit with some difficulty – not to participate any more in government and to become part of the opposition. Has it really been deprived or has it paid the price of the call by the leadership of the ex-Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) to boycott the elections? The importance of abstention allows us at least to raise the hypothesis and to check the readiness, almost unanimous in the Algerian media, to decree that Islamism is in a phase of reflux. The only authenticated element is that Islamist parties attacked by government and that officially play the card of 'moderation' and 'participation' with government have suffered defeat. Does this mean that this defeat also affects those FIS Islamists, who are in opposition and threatened by exile and the loss of their political and civil rights? Indeed, the authorities were not content to ban the leadership of the Islamic party from carrying out its activities, but extended the ban to all those who had, at one time or another, taken part in the activities of the party when it was legal. The ban on FIS militants, and Salafists in general, does not allow us to have a precise idea of the weight of the Islamist forces in Algeria. This is what *Le Quotidien d'Oran* stresses in an article evocatively entitled "Terra Incognita"⁶: "Until today, one stands on the affirmation incessantly presented as a primary truth that radical Islamism in the shape of the FIS will be strongly discredited. In reality, the real Algerian political mystery is that we do not have the means to confirm this claim. It is at most a question of impressions or sensations and it is enough to

discuss it in order to discover that they are contradictory and insufficiently verified. The breadth of abstention during the last elections cannot but encourage caution regarding those who decree the end of Islamism", stresses the author of the article, before concluding that "the impossible identification of political currents, which is not limited to the Islamists, is the natural consequence of a political life reduced to its simplest bureaucratic expression. It is therefore not surprising that the political reality of Algerian society remains terra incognita, an enigmatic continent".

Here we touch on one of the blocking factors in the Algerian regime and its refusal to move towards a genuine representation of Algerian society. In one of his last interviews,⁷ the great militant and political figure Algerian Abdelhamid Mehri, who died on 30 January 2012, revealed that the exclusion of the FIS Islamists from the political scene was a blocking factor: "Telling a citizen that he no longer has rights, that because he thought or thinks in such a way, he cannot be a candidate or that he can be imprisoned in the Sahara. This is not acceptable. One simply recreates the native political society".⁸ The failure of accredited Islamist parties – their critics refer to them as "regime's Islamists" – together with the high rate of abstention does not allow us to draw reliable conclusions about the real weight of the Islamists in Algeria. Since the current embodied by the FIS was excluded from the game by political-security means, it could not express in the Islamist parties, but rather in massive abstention. The 'victory' of the two regime's parties, the FLN and the

⁶ [http://www.lequotidien-
oran.com/?news=5168467&archive_date=2012-05-21](http://www.lequotidien-oran.com/?news=5168467&archive_date=2012-05-21).

⁷ [http://lanation.info/Entretien-avec-Abdelhamid-
Mehri-ce-n-est-pas-la-reforme-c-est-la-
continuation_a103.html](http://lanation.info/Entretien-avec-Abdelhamid-Mehri-ce-n-est-pas-la-reforme-c-est-la-continuation_a103.html).

⁸ During the French colonial system.

RND, was in fact on the basis of a restricted electoral base. Twenty years after the interruption of the electoral – and democratic – process in January 1992, it is a politically static Algeria that has emerged from the elections. The legislative elections called by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika as a great moment of ‘reform’ are therefore not in the least conclusive.

Cutting the Gaudian knot?

The legislative elections of 1 May 2012 did not constitute the start of reform of the political system. On the contrary, through a show of opening up but with top-down control, they revived its functioning based on exclusion. The interesting element in these elections is that they demonstrated the demand for reform through abstention and blank votes. The ‘Algerian specificity’ invoked by the government only retains the fact that society, worn out by the civil war of the 1990s, does not want conflict.

Again we should stress that the potential for violence is still very high due to the absence of adequately credible political, trade union and associative mediation. What is most remarkable is that the rejection of violence that predominates at the moment was not transformed into consent for the system in place. Even if the Algerian government has benefitted from the West’s ‘approval’, the demands of its citizens for reform have not been satisfied, even to re-establish a minimum of efficacy in the functioning of the State.

The government is eventually the one that has the power to initiate a reform that can hardly be deferred. Since the pursuit of a peaceful contestation by abstention is not a guarantee, it is necessary to go on and introduce some changes that will help re-establish the bonds

between Algeria’s institutions and its citizens. This could take the form of the – announced – reform of the Constitution, which would re-establish a limit on the number of presidential mandates, previously lifted to allow Abdelaziz Bouteflika to canvass for a third mandate. In Algeria, however, the amendment of legal texts has never been synonymous with political development, due to the permanence of a duality between, on the one hand, an informal power in the shape of the intelligence, the military elite and, increasingly, financial forces and, on the other hand, a formal power such as that outlined by the Constitution.

One obstacle to reform is that part of this informal power is concerned that a real opening-up might provoke a demand for accountability for the running of the country, and more seriously for the enormous damage caused by security policy in the 1990s. How can the Gaudian knot be cut? Some think that all that is needed is a compromise to allow Algeria to continue down the road towards political modernisation.⁹ And that in an optimistic hypothesis this ‘historic compromise’ leading to the end of informal power and the revitalisation of official institutions could be accomplished with the help of the next presidential elections.

⁹ [www.arab-reform.net/IMG/pdf/SSR Algerie M-Mustapha May12 Final Fr.pdf](http://www.arab-reform.net/IMG/pdf/SSR_Algerie_M-Mustapha_May12_Final_Fr.pdf).